

ARCHAEOLOGY & SYMBOLISM IN AZTEC
MEXICO: THE TEMPLO MAYOR OF
TENOCHTITLAN

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The excavations of Templo Mayor in Mexico City between 1978–1982 have provided important archaeological data which, combined with the ethnohistorical data, greatly broaden our knowledge of the Templo Mayor of Mexico-Tenochtitlan, the capital city that controlled the Aztec Empire between 1425–1521. My interpretation of the symbolism of the Templo Mayor is based on the combined archaeological and written resources associated with the ceremonial center of the Aztec capital. In my view the Templo Mayor is a precise example of the Mexica views of the cosmos, consisting of sacred mountains which constitute the fundamental symbolic center of the vertical and horizontal cosmos of the Aztec universe. The twin temples of Tlaloc and Huitzilopochtli situated on top of the pyramidal base are replicas of this cosmic order.

As an archaeologist committed to understanding the relationship of economic structures to ideological forms, I am attempting to uncover the interrelationship of the material and symbolic character of the Great Aztec Temple. In what follows, I will describe the material record of the major portions of the excavation and offer my interpretation of the symbolic order of the Temple.

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DISCOVERY!

On the night of February 21, 1978, the workers of the Mexico City electric-power company were digging at the corner of Guatemala and Argentina streets when they encountered a huge, round stone covered with Aztec reliefs. The Office of Salvage Archaeology of the National Institute of Anthropology and History led a team of archaeologists in excavating the 3.25 meter wide stone disc. On the upper surface of the disc was sculptured the representation of a female deity: nude, decapitated and with her arms and legs separated from her torso, and decorated with snakes, skulls and earth monster imagery. This was without a doubt the representation of Coyolxauhqui, sister of the Aztec patron god, Huitzilopochtli. In the written sources, Coyolxauhqui was a lunar deity who was slain and dismembered by her brother after a battle on the sacred hill of Coatepec (Snake Mountain).

The chance discovery renewed interest in excavating the ancient Great Temple of the Mexicas: the people of the Aztec city of Tenochtitlan. As the initial excavation revealed, the monumental sculpture of Coyolxauhqui formed a part of the temple platform which led up to the shrine of Huitzilopochtli. Under the authority of the President of Mexico, Miguel Lopez-Portillo, a full scale excavation of the site was planned and carried out under my co-direction. The project, entitled Proyecto Templo Mayor, involved a number of scientific and cultural problems which were continuously discussed throughout the excavation. One important dimension of the Great Temple Project for social scientists was the opportunity to demystify our pre-Hispanic past. In general the pre-Hispanic past has been the object of a distorted vision based on certain ideological principles which picture the ancient world as one of grandeur, marvelous architecture, superb astronomy, excellent in everything. This vision of the pre-Hispanic world ignores a more integrated view of the pre-Columbian societies which should present evidence of the many components of Mesoamerican social life and the complex interrelationships of groups and cultures.

In the case of the Great Temple Project, we were aware that we faced a unique opportunity to study a fundamental part of the Aztec state which reflected the dynamic interplay of different peoples, ideologies and economic patterns. We approached the excavation with the goal of understanding all spheres which composed the society represented at the Templo Mayor.

The people who founded the Templo Mayor arrived in the lake of Mexico and established their temple around 1325 A.D. The historical sources say that the first thing the Aztecs did was build a rush and reed temple for their deity, Huitzilopochtli, who had led them on a long

pilgrimage to the site. It is this temple that served as the center of the society that struggled to establish a stronghold in the world of competing city-states of 14th century Mexico. In this manner the temple began to constitute the midpoint of the whole cosmivision of Aztec society.

MORPHOLOGY

In our study of the history and structure of the Templo Mayor we have essentially two types of information. On the one hand we have a) 16th century chronicles and pre-Conquest pictographs, and b) on the other hand we have the complex archaeological data which have been periodically uncovered since the 18th century.

Among the existing documents we have one that indicates the precise moment of the founding of Aztec society. The frontispiece of the document known as the Codex Mendocino illustrates the foundation of the city under the guidance of Huitzilopochtli. The drawing shows that the city of Tenochtitlan was originally divided into four sections with the image of a great eagle perched in a cactus growing from a stone in the center of the lake. It was on this spot that the first temple was built. In this manner we see the immediate establishment and separation of the sacred landscape from the surrounding territory.

Various written sources tell us that the ceremonial center was approximately 400 meters on each side, contained about 78 temples, and had several entryways aligned to cardinal directions. We know for certain that there was one at the north, south and west side. Some historical sources indicate that there was one on the east as well which would be most logical.

The Great Temple occupied the center space and consisted of a large high platform of four or five stepped levels, facing toward the west with two steep stairways leading up to the top level. At the top were two structures: the sanctuaries of Tlaloc (the god of water, rain and fertility) and of Huitzilopochtli (the god of war and of the sun). It was in front of these two imposing sanctuaries that massive human sacrifices took place.

The 16th century Franciscan, Bernardino de Sahagun, writes of Tlaloc: "This god called Tlaloc Tlamacazqui was the god of rain. They said he gave them the rains to irrigate the earth and that these rains caused all the grasses, trees, fruits and grains to grow. It was he who also sent hail and thunder and lightning and storms on the water and the dangers of the rivers and sea. The name Tlaloc Tlamacazqui means that he is the god who resides in the terrestrial paradise and gives to men the subsistence necessary for life."

Sahagun researched Aztec religion for 30 years in the central

valley of Mexico while attempting to convert the Indians. His work revealed the great power of Huitzilopochtli: "The god called Huitzilopochtli was another Hercules, exceedingly robust, of great strength and very bellicose, a great destroyer of towns and killer of people. In warfare, he was like living fire, greatly feared by his enemies . . . While he lived this man was highly esteemed for his strength and prowess in war."

The prominence of these two deities reflects the fundamental needs of the Mexicas: their economy was based on agricultural production (hence the importance of water and rain) and on tribute collected by conquest of the many towns and cities in central Mexico (hence the importance of war). Thus we expected that all the elements associated with the Great Temple, such as offerings and sculptures, would in some way be related to these two fundamental themes.

It is absolutely clear that the Great Temple of Tenochtitlan was the place, real or symbolic, where Mexica power was centered. It is significant that the shrines to the two great deities related to the economic structure of the Mexica state were located at the top of temple: Tlaloc, god of rain, water, and agricultural production; and Huitzilopochtli, god of war, conquest and tribute. Their presence at the Great Temple indicates a coherent relationship between structure and superstructure. Let me summarize briefly my use of these terms. The "structure" refers to everything relating to the economic base of the group: productive forces, including habitat and natural resources, and man as an active component who uses these forces and transforms them with his tools in the process of production. Structure also includes the relationships that are created between those who exercise power and those who are subject to the controlling group, including the people conquered by the Mexica. As for the "superstructure," it is made up of such aspects as art, philosophy, religion (ideology), etc: all of this under the control of the governing class known in Aztec society as the *pillis*.

Concerning these vital relationships we can propose the following general postulates: (1) the archaeological context associated with the Great Temple such as offerings, sculpture, architecture, has an ideological content which probably reflects the ideology of the dominant group and indicates how it uses two apparatus of the state, the repressive and the ideological, to maintain its hegemony and assist in its reproduction. The first apparatus acts by using force and the second is expressed through religion, art, education, the family and the political system and (2) the different discoveries including sculpture, murals and offerings, probably reflect both internal and external Mexica control, through the presence of their own materials (Mexica) and of other groups (tribute).

In order to be able to understand what the Great Temple signified, it is necessary to refer to two categories which will help us in the process of our investigation: *phenomenon* and *essence*.

Our research begins with the study of a collection of phenomena related to the Great Temple, and these phenomena allow us to penetrate the essence which produced them. To analyze scientifically this motley collection of phenomena, we must use the two general categories which play an important role in the process of acquiring knowledge. The first refers to the outward appearance of objects and the processes of its objective reality, which moves and changes. "Essence," the more stable of two categories, is the internal aspect of process that is contained within and manifested through a phenomenon. Scientific knowledge would be directed not only to the study of phenomena, but to the study of internal processes, of the essence that produces these phenomena.

The phenomenal aspect is what we generally know as the presence of Tlaloc and Huitzilopochtli at the Great Temple, the symbols and elements proper to each deity, the rituals of the various festivals and their characteristics. This includes everything which is manifested and present before the priest and the participants, with all its religious complexity.

The essence is what is not directly present but which, nevertheless, acts as the basis of this process. For us, this is the ideological presence of the two deities at the Great Temple. First, there is Tlaloc, an ancient god of water and rain for agricultural peoples such as the Mexica, and second, there is Huitzilopochtli, a tribal god, solar god, god of war and domination over other groups. This domination required the generous payment of tribute from conquered areas. Tenochtitlan used this tribute to provide itself with a whole series of products necessary to its economy: loads of corn, beans, cacao, cloth, feathers, objects; raw materials like skins, stones, lime, etc. In other words, the presence of these two gods and not others, at the top of the temple is a reflection of the economic and political base of Tenochtitlan.

ORIGINS AND ORIENTATION

The Mexica were the last Nahua group to penetrate the Valley of Mexico during the middle of the 13th century. Guided by their titular god, Huitzilopochtli, they left Aztlan, place of the purple heron, and traveled until they arrived, many years later, at the promised island where they settled, prospered and finally disappeared, annihilated several centuries later in the Spanish conquests. A beautiful Nahua text has survived which tells us of their original journey.

And as the Mexica came,
 it was clear they moved aimlessly,
 they were the last who came.
 No one knew their faces.
 So they could settle nowhere,
 they were always cast out,
 they were persecuted everywhere.
 Then they came to Chapultepec
 where many people settled.
 The rule of Lord Azcapotzalco already existed,
 but Mexico did not yet exist.
 There were still fields of rush and reed
 where Mexico is today.

A number of historical chronicles relate how the Mexica arrived in the valley of Mexico after many hardships and found the different city-states engaged in intense military struggles for control of the valley and its resources. The Mexica eventually submitted to the Tepanec lord of Azcapotzalco who extracted tribute from them in exchange for the right to settle on the edges of their territory which was a marshy island in the middle of the lake. This occurred in the year 2 House or 1325.

It was here, in the middle of the lake, where the Mexica began to construct their first temple. One chronicle tells us:

Seeing that everything
 was filled with mystery,
 they went on, to seek
 the omen of the eagle
 and wandering from place to place
 they saw the cactus and on it the eagle.
 When the eagle saw them, it bowed to them,
 nodding its head in their direction.
 Now we have seen what we wanted,
 now we have received what we sought.
 "My children, we should be grateful to our god
 and thank him for the blessing he has given us.
 Let us all go and build at the place of the cactus
 a small temple where our god may rest."

During the ensuing decades, the Mexica enlarged their temple, the Great Temple, numerous times by utilizing previous stages as the foundation for the larger structure. Our excavation shows that the temple was enlarged seven times on all four sides and on top, while the main facade received a number of partial enlargements. We will now describe what the Great Temple was like, referring to both the archaeological data and reports from historical sources.

Until recently, our fundamental sources of information about the Great Temple were the chronicles written in the 16th century. Now

that we have the excavated temple before us we see that the historical descriptions were faithful to what the Spaniards saw and what they had learned from native sources. Also, the project has uncovered very ancient stages of the Great Temple built around 1390 (designated as Epoch II) which even the last generations of the Mexicas were not familiar with. This earliest stage was completely covered by the many superimpositions built during the 15th century. We are only able to observe the uppermost part of the earliest temple because 3/4s of the temple is still below the ground. We were not able to uncover it because it is now covered by the natural water of the lake of Mexico.

After excavation, we can now confirm that the last Mexica construction epoch of the Great Temple had been razed to its foundations by the Spanish. We found only traces of the edifice on the stone-slab pavement of the great plaza. On the north side of the plaza only about a meter of the platform wall remains. The earliest construction epochs, however, were better preserved: they were older, smaller and had sunk farther below the present street level.

In placing our archaeological findings against the background of historical accounts, we know that the Great Temple was oriented with its principal facade toward the west. As stated, it was built on a large platform which supported a foursided structure with two stairways leading upward to the two shrines of Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc. Huitzilopochtli's shrine was on the south side, while Tlaloc's was located on the north side.

The temple was enlarged many times for different reasons. On the one hand the city of Tenochtitlan suffered periodic floods which required the raising of the base of the structure. The Temple also had structural defects due to the sinking of the unstable earth beneath it. On the other hand, the historical sources tell how some of the rulers ordered the construction of new temple on top of existing ones, creating a pattern of superimposing new stages of the Great Temple. These reconstructions accompanied the enthronement of a king or the major expansion of Aztec territory.

STRUCTURE

Let me give a general picture of each stage of the Great Temple by utilizing a system of Roman numerals which designate total enlargements of the four-sided structure. A Roman numeral accompanied by a letter refers to the additions on the main facade only.

Epoch I refers to the first temple structure which historical sources indicate was a small hut made of perishable materials. No excavation is possible.

Epoch II is the earliest excavated epoch of the Great Temple; it

was found almost intact and dates from about 1390 A.D. It provides us with startling information about the symbolism of Templo Mayor. We could only excavate the uppermost parts of this building and the remains of the two sanctuaries on top which were constructed of stone with some of the stucco still covering the surfaces (a mixture of lime and sand). In front of the entry to Huitzilopochtli's shrine we found the notorious stone of human sacrifice.

The pattern of twin temples and sacrificial stone which we found intact at this earliest stage is similar to the reports of Spanish chronicles and priests, eyewitness accounts of the final stage of construction in 1520.

Of the temple itself, Sahagun writes: "In the center and higher than the (other temples of the city) the principal (temple) was dedicated to the god Huitzilopochtli, or Tlacauepan Cuexcotzin. This (pyramid) was divided at the top so that it looked like two; it had two (sanctuaries), the principal one, stood the statue of Huitzilopochtli . . . also called Ilhuicatl Xoxouhqui; in the other was the image of the god Tlaloc. In front of each one of these statues was a round stone like an executioner's block, called techcatl, where they killed all those whom they sacrificed in honor of that god. From the block to the ground there was a pool of blood from those who were killed on it, and this was true of all the (temples). They all faced west and had very narrow and steep steps leading to the top."

Bernal Diaz describes what he saw; "On each altar were two giant figures, very tall and very fat. They said that the one on the right was Huichilobos (sic), their war-god." He adds: "At the very top of the (pyramid) there was another concavity, the woodwork of which was very finely carved, and here there was another image, half man and half lizard . . . They said that the body of this creature contained all the seeds in the world, and that he was the god of seedtime and harvest."

Discussing sacrifices in honor of Xipe Totec, Sahagun adds: "Having brought them to the sacrificial stone, which was a stone three hands in height or a little more, and two in width, or almost, they threw them on their backs."

It is interesting that we found a sacrificial stone, the obvious symbol of Mexica power and where captives of war were sacrificed in front of the 1390 sanctuary of Hutzilopochtli. It is a slab of black volcanic rock, and its dimensions conform with those given by Sahagun. The stone, which was found in situ embedded in the floor near the stairs (two meters away) measured 50 centimeters by 45 (20 inches by 18).

On the Tlaloc side of the top level of the 1390 temple we found a polychromed statue, known as a chacmool, also in situ and in the same

position as the sacrificial stone in relation to the sanctuary of Huitzilopochtli. The find confirms the historical interpretation of the role of the chacmool: it is an intermediary between the priest and the god, a divine messenger. Both elements—the sacrificial stone and the chacmool—in front of the sanctuaries can be considered as dual symbols, the first symbol related to war and the second to a more “religious” idea: the divine messenger.

We discovered that two large stone piers framed the entrance of the sanctuary of Tlaloc. The surfaces of the piers that faced outward were painted with a row of black and white circles representing the eyes of Tlaloc; just below the circles were three horizontal bands, one blue and two red. The lower halves of the piers were decorated with alternating vertical bands of black and white. In the interior of the structure we discovered the bench on which the image of Tlaloc probably sat. We consider this stage to be prior to 1428, the year in which the Mexica liberated themselves from Atzacotzalco and began their climb to dominance. It may correspond to the reign of the Aztec ruler Huitzilhuhtl.

In front of the sacrificial stone on Huitzilopochtli’s side, on the last step leading up to the platform and on an axis with the sacrificial stone, we found the sculptured face of a person with the glyph two rabbit carved above. This year sign is equivalent to the year 1390 A.D. In the interior of the shrine, behind the sacrificial stone we discovered a stone bench which runs north-south. In the middle there is a small altar which apparently supported a statue of the deity Huitzilopochtli. Following this stage, we found partial remains of superimpositions IIa, IIb, IIc, which show a deficient system of construction on the western facade of the temple.

Epoch III: This stage reveals finely made steep stairways bordered by vertically constructed foundations. Most significant, we found eight impressive sculptures of life-size standard bearers reclining on the stairway leading to Huitzilopochtli’s shrine. These figures were probably located at symbolic locations around the building before they were gathered together on this stairway when the next stage was constructed over them.

This structure has the glyph 4 reed carved into the rear platform wall of Huitzilopochtli’s stairway. It is equivalent to the year 1431, which corresponds to the rule of Itzcoatl.

Stage IV: This stage is one of the richest in its elements. The large general platform is adorned with braziers and serpent heads on each of its four sides. The braziers on the side of Tlaloc (in the rear, for example) show the face of this god while braziers on the side of Huitzilopochtli have only a bow which symbolizes that deity. Beneath the braziers and serpents were found various offerings of which you

can still see the cists. Stage IVb is an addition to the main facade (on the west) which has yielded a great series of significant objects. It includes the great platform which the Great Temple rests upon, a platform which contains stairways at both ends. Next to the stairways we found enormous serpents whose undulating bodies and great heads still carry some of the original pigment which covered them. The wide flight of steps to the platform is only interrupted by a small altar with two frogs resting on top of small pedestals. These sculptures are found in line with the middle of the stairway which leads to the upper part of Tlaloc's temple. On the side of Huitzilopochtli, in front of the stairway which leads to his shrine, we found a stone serpent 2.50 meters long which forms part of the fourth stairway of the platform.

The pedestal forming the base of the stairs which led to the upper part supports 4 serpent heads, two located at the extreme ends of the pedestal and two in the middle, which mark the union of both buildings. At the center of the Huitzilopochtli side of the platform we found the monumental stone sculpture of Coyolxauhqui, who is the dismembered sister of the war god. In Aztec myth, these two deities fought at the hill of Coatepec and together they constitute a major portion of the symbolism of the Great Temple. On this platform, we found various offerings, some around the Coyolxauhqui stone, others between the two serpent heads and others in the middle of the stairway to Tlaloc. All of these offerings were found beneath the platform while chambers 1 and 2 were found behind the stairways in the exact middle of each one of these buildings.

At the extreme north and south of this platform were found the remains of rooms with colored marble floors. Also, on the Tlaloc side was found a small stairway leading to a tiny altar within which were discovered two extremely impressive offerings. One contained more than 42 skulls and bones of children, finely covered masks and delicately painted funerary urns full of small sea shells perhaps representing human hearts. Below this rich offering we found another offering called chamber III. Both were dedicated to Tlaloc.

Chronologically, we think that much of stage IV corresponds to the reign of Moctezuma I because we discovered a glyph 1 rabbit on the Huitzilopochtli side of the platform which is equivalent to the year 1454. The additional elements of Coyolxauhqui and the serpents could well correspond to the reign of Axayacatl, for another glyph on the south side of the structure carries the symbol 3 House which is the year 1469 coinciding with the ascent to the throne of that king.

Epoch V: We have only found the general platform of stage V, covered with stucco as well as part of the floor of the great ceremonial enclosure formed by slabs which were joined by stucco.

Epoch VI is the penultimate one which formed part of the great platform previously discussed. The principal facade reveals a wall with three serpent heads facing west, a decorated beam and a stairway.

THE OFFERINGS AND THEIR SYMBOLIC ORDER

Perhaps the most exciting and intellectually significant aspect of the entire excavation was the unexpected discovery of more than 100 offerings buried at or near the Great Temple. Some were discovered as offerings in the smaller shrines adjacent to the Templo Mayor.

As for the location of these rich caches, generally, they were placed along certain axes. On the main facade there were three main axes: the first two beneath the floor of the platform facing the middle of each of the two stairways; the other closer to the junction of the stairways leading up to the twin temples of Tlaloc and Huitzilopochtli. They were also located at the corners of the Temple as well as along the north-south axis approximately halfway down the structure. There are also three axes at the back part: at the middle of each of the buildings and at their junctions. Some of the offerings were placed around the base, equidistant from each other.

In general, it can be stated that the placement of objects within the offerings was made according to a symbolism which we must decode. This means that the objects and their placement have a language. For example, there are materials which usually occupy the lower part of an offering on the bottom, just as others always occupy the upper part. We have also observed that the materials are oriented in a certain way. Both the offerings on the west side (main facade) and in the back part of the Temple are oriented toward the west, in the direction of the setting sun, while those that are found halfway down the Temple on its northern and southern facade are oriented in those directions. Another interesting aspect is that the placement of objects within an offering also follows a plan. Offerings 7 and 61, the first of which is located halfway down the southern side of the structure, the other on the northern side, both have the same distribution of materials. On the bottom, strombus mollusks are oriented north to south; over them were placed crocodiles. On top were placed the seated gods whom we have denominated Xiuhtecuhtli, since they represent old people. On the right side of these gods we have marine coral and on their left a clay vessel with an effigy of the god Tlaloc. Could this distribution mean that the strombus represent the sea and the crocodiles an earthly level and Xiuhtecuhtli and Tlaloc a heavenly level? The same thing occurs with offerings 11 and 17, the first of which is located on the main facade between the two serpent heads which marks the junction

of the shrines of Tlaloc and Huitzilopochtli and the other located at the back part of the junction of both edifices.

The material obtained from the 100 plus offerings associated with the Great Temple is abundant and varied. More than 7,000 objects have been uncovered including pieces which are clearly Mexica and others which definitely came from tributary areas. The great majority of the tribute objects came from the present states of Guerrero, from the Mixteca (Oaxaca), and the Gulf Coast (Puebla). Interestingly, not one single object came from the Tarascan culture in the west (which, as we know, was not under Mexica control). The same thing pertains to other areas, such as the Maya, from which there are no materials. Among the Mexica materials, the most numerous objects are sculptures of seated old men, probably Xiuhtecuhtlis, dressed only in their "maxtlatl" or loinclothes and wearing headresses characterized by two protuberances. Xiuhtecuhtli was the father of the gods located at the center of the universe and of the home.

Other Mexica representations are numerous effigies of the god Tlaloc, carved out of "tezontle" (volcanic rock) and other kinds of stone; some coiled serpents; representations of rattlesnake heads made of obsidian; stone braziers with knotted bows.

There are other remarkable pieces from the tributary areas revealing the geographical expansion and limits of the empire. There are a great quantity of Mezcala masks and figures of different kinds of sizes from the Southwest region. There are also alabaster pieces from the Puebla region, such as deer heads and finely carved arrows and seated deities. From the Gulf Coast we have two magnificent funerary urns of orange ceramic, inside of which were found fragments of burned bones, necklaces and other materials. The great variety of snails and shells, fish, swordfish swords, and corals come partly from the Gulf Coast and partly from the Pacific. The same thing is true of the crocodiles and jaguars, which came from Veracruz, Tabasco or Chiapas. These objects reflect the style and ecological forms of the Aztec peripheries.

Another group of objects includes those which clearly belong to societies which long preceded the Mexica. Such is the case with the magnificent Teotihuacan masks and the beautiful Olmec mask which were excavated. The latter came from the region which lies within the borders of the states of Puebla, Oaxaca and Guerrero, according to the petrographic analysis which has been made.

All of the material is under study but a preliminary analysis reveals that the majority of the objects represents Tlaloc or symbols associated with him, such as all of the objects of marine origin, canoes and art forms. We also have objects associated with Huitzilopochtli such as the braziers with the knotted bows; skulls of the decapitated

victims, "tecpatl" sacrificial knives with eyes and teeth of shell, and the presence of objects which came from tributary areas, the products of military conquest. Significantly, no stone image of Huitzilopochtli has been found.

The foregoing tends to confirm our hypothesis that the Mexica were, of necessity, an agricultural and militaristic people whose sustenance depended on both agriculture and tribute, water and war, life and death, and all of this was integrated in the Great Temple of Tenochtitlan. Moreover, the Templo Mayor represents the concentration of Mexica power and their control over the destiny of conquered peoples, just as Huitzilopochtli conquered and took control of the "anecuyotl" (destiny) of his brothers. On a symbolic level this is important, for it shows how the Mexica continue the mission initiated by their titular god. They not only take control over the "destiny" of the conquered peoples but also control their agricultural production.

THE SYMBOLISM OF THE GREAT TEMPLE

We shall now discuss an extremely important subject: the symbolism of the Templo Mayor. As we shall see, this symbolism was based partly on the myth of the struggle between Huitzilopochtli and Coyolxauhqui on the hill of Coatepec. Also, research has revealed the historical basis of the myth, which helps us understand the tie between the historical conquest and cosmological conquest in Aztec life.

On many occasions real historical events are converted over the course of time into myths. Several world religions offer us examples of this assertion. As the history of religions teaches us, there are many cases when an individual, because of his special qualities is deified after his death. The same thing happens with places at which a transformative event occurs. These places are made sacred by the society which experienced the event and it becomes the center for future orientation. Once the place is made sacred or the individual is deified, it becomes necessary to reproduce what took place in what has now become "mythic time". Therefore, the need emerges to ritually re-enact the mythic event. Hence it is indispensable to explore the deeper significance of rituals, since behind each rite there generally is a myth. Occasionally, there is behind the myth a real, historical fact. We can summarize the process of ritual formation in this way: (a) historical, real fact is told in (b) myth, which is (c) re-enacted in ritual. This process of ritual formation is clearly reflected in the Aztec traditions associated with the Templo Mayor.

If we study carefully the myth of the struggle between Huitzilopochtli and his sister Coyolxauhqui we can see how the aforemen-

tioned steps have been followed and how the Templo Mayor is the re-enactment of the myth, all of this based on a real, historical fact.

The sixteenth century chroniclers, Alvarado Tezozomoc and Diego Duran tell us how in the process of the migrations from Aztlan, the Mexicas arrived at a place called "Coatepec" (Hill of the Serpent), where they settled. However, they were part of a group, the Huitznahua, who disobeyed their leader Huitzilopochtli, who then attacked them and killed a woman warrior, Coyolxauhqui, decapitating her. The Huitznahua were defeated and their hearts taken out.

Some authors have interpreted this account to mean that historically a significant struggle occurred at a hill called Coatepec. It seems certain that part of the group, made up of people from the barrio of Huitznahua, opposed the forces of Huitzilopochtli. The Huitznahua were led by a woman, Coyolxauhqui, the woman with bells on her cheeks, and they lost the confrontation. This rebellion signifies the attempt to usurp the power and control of the larger group. It is a matter, then, of an internal power struggle. Nevertheless, this event provided the basis for the appearance of the myth which was reported to the Franciscan friar, Sahagun, who used old Indians as informants in the writing of his *Historia General*. At the time of Sahagun, 1550–1570, it was believed that Huitzilopochtli was born on the hill of Coatepec, while in the historical version we find that he arrived there after a pilgrimage. What happened at Coatepec held great importance to the Mexica, who believed that the tutelar god was born there.

The "divine song" told to Sahagun tells that:

On Coatepec, in the direction of Tula,
 a woman by the name of Coatlicue,
 the mother of the four hundred Southerners,
 and of a sister of one of them
 named Coyolxauhqui,
 was sweeping when some plumage
 fell on her . . .
 From that moment Coatlicue was pregnant . . .
 When the four hundred Southerners saw
 that their mother was pregnant,
 they became very angry . . .
 And their sister Coyolxauhqui
 said to them:
 Brothers, she has dishonored us,
 we must kill our mother . . .
 When the four hundred Southerners were resolved
 to kill, to destroy their mother,
 then they began to move out,
 Coyolxauhqui guided them . . .
 At that moment Huitzilopochtli was born,
 He dressed himself in his finery,
 he took out the serpent made of candlewood . . .

Then with it he wounded Coyolxauhqui,
he cut off her head,
which was left abandoned
on the slope of Coatepetl.
The body of Coyolxauhqui
rolled down the slope,
it fell apart in pieces,
her hands, her legs, her torso
fell in different places . . .
Then Huitzilopochtli raised up,
he pursued the four hundred Southerners,
he kept on pursuing them, he scattered them
from the top of Coatepetl,
the mountain of the serpent.

Before we begin our discussion of matters related to the re-enactment of the myth and how the Templo Mayor is the living myth, it will be helpful to summarize several major aspects of Aztec cosmology related to the Great Temple.

For the Mexica, the Universe consisted of two fundamental planes, one horizontal and one vertical. The first was made up of the four cardinal directions, each with its characteristic color, its own sign and the god who ruled it. This was also the plane where the earth (the *Cem-anahuac*) was located, symbolized by a portion of earth completely surrounded by water. In the center from which the four directions radiated was located the Great Temple. The Temple was intersected by the vertical plane, characterized by nine lower levels of a netherworld, a place through which the dead must travel in order to arrive at the ninth and deepest level: *Mictlan*. The upper levels consist of thirteen heavens which lead to the highest level: *Omeyocan*, the Place of Duality, in which resides the Dual Lord and Lady, *Ometecuhtli* and *Omecihuatli*.

The Mexicans tried to symbolize this cosmological structure in the Great Temple, in their ceremonial precinct and in their city.

It is not surprising, for example, that the Temple of *Ehecatl-Quetzalcoatl*, god of the wind, is located opposite the Templo Mayor facing east. Let us recall that in the myth of the emergence of the sun and of the moon in *Teotihuacan*, the assembly of deities were confused as to where the new sun would rise. *Quetzalcoatl* looked toward the east and the rising sun appeared above the horizon. *Quetzalcoatl's* shrine is located with its main facade oriented toward that cardinal point of the equinox sunrise. We also wish to point out that exactly north of the Templo Mayor we located three shrines during our excavations. We have named the center one a "tzompantli" or skull rack altar, since it is decorated with more than two hundred forty carved skulls. Its relationship to death is evident and, contrary to

our expectation that a shrine similar to this might appear on the southern side of the Great Temple, no equivalent temple was found. This reminds us that the Mictlampa (the place of the dead) is located in Mexican cosmology in the northern quadrant.

From the earliest construction stages we have uncovered, we find present the idea of duality: there exist two bases built on a common platform with their respective shrines in the upper part, the shrine of the god of water and that of the god of war. A review of the mythology suggests that both represent sacred hills or sacred mountains revered in Mexica tradition.

The temple on the southern side, corresponding to Huitzilopochtli, is a specific symbol of the mountain the Aztecs called the Templo Mayor, Coatepec. If we analyze the placement of deities we see that the god Huitzilopochtli is located on high, while his sister, Coyolxauhqui, represented in the great stone, lies conquered at the foot of the hill-temple, on the platform, decapitated and dismembered. The temple stairway and Coyolxauhqui were not placed randomly, but in precise places assigned to them by myth. Also on the platform supporting the Coyolxauhqui stone are the serpent heads which adorn and give their name to the hill-temple: Coatepec (Hill of the Serpent).

We believe that in the third construction stage the material which forms the base of the temple is composed of projecting stones with no representations in order to give a better idea of a hill. They simply have their natural form and they jut out from the walls. In the same period, eight anthropomorphic sculptures were found leaning against the stairway leading up to Huitzilopochtli's temple. The sculptures may represent the Centzonhuitznahua, the enemies of Huitzilopochtli, whom he annihilated in the myth. In this way, the Templo Mayor, on the southern side, represents the real-mythical place of the combat of Huitzilopochtli and his siblings. The chronicles tell us that in the festival of Panquetzalitzli dedicated to Huitzilopochtli, everything that happened in the myth was repeated in elaborate rituals culminating in sacrifice, on the top of the Templo Mayor, of warriors conquered and captured for that purpose. Their hearts were taken out and their bodies were thrown down the stairway, where the bodies were divided among those who had captured them. That is the way Coyolxauhqui is depicted in the magnificent sculpture which is located at the foot of the hill-temple: dead and dismembered. This allows us to reflect upon that cosmic struggle between the sun and the moon, between light and nocturnal powers. The moon in various religions is associated with the feminine, while the sun is masculine. It is not surprising that in the historical record Huitzilopochtli constantly had problems with Malinalxochitl and Coyolxauhqui dur-

ing the pilgrimage, which also might be related to the problems of the patriarchy or even a change from the lunar to the solar. Further research may tell us more about this aspect of the symbolism.

For its part, the Tlaloc side of Templo Mayor also represents a hill. We know from several chronicles that homage was also rendered to this god on the tops of sacred hills and at special locations in the lake. One hill in particular, known as Mount Tlaloc in Spanish times was the site of major ritual pilgrimages of Aztec kings. At the ceremonial center on Mount Tlaloc child sacrifice was carried out to renew the agricultural forces of the Aztec world. As expected, it was on the Tlaloc side of the temple that we found the remains of child sacrifice beneath the platform floor. In the *Codex Borbonicus*, Tlaloc is shown several times with his shrine on top of a hill. The distinctiveness of Tlaloc's hill at the Templo Mayor is suggested by the different kinds of serpents which adorn the half of the platform that belongs to him.

What is important to note here is that both hills are the living presence, made visible, of myths which were important to the Mexicas. On one side, the myth of their tutelary god, who was born to fight, and on the other the hill of sustenance, the place of Tlaloc, where the food that is used to sustain man is obtained. In a broader sense, we are in the presence of a significant duality: the Great Temple is the place or symbol of life (Tlaloc) and death (Huitzilopochtli). It also appears that the Templo Mayor's vertical symmetry indicates the different levels of the cosmos as well. We believe that the general platform on which the Temple rests may well represent the earthly level. This platform is characterized by having a single common stairway on which is located the altar of the frogs, an aquatic symbol associated with the waters of the earth. The braziers which surround the four sides of the Temple are also on the platform and represent fire. On the main facade are the serpents which indicate the horizontal earth. The stepped sides of the Templo represent diverse heavens or levels of ascent until one arrives at the upper level where the two shrines in which the gods are located represents the Dual Heaven, Omeyocan, from which all creation emerges.

What is described here does not belong exclusively to the Mexicas of Tenochtitlan, but also with their own variations and characteristics, to a number of people who had a socio-economic development similar to that of Tenochtitlan.

My intention has been to present a general panorama of what has been obtained from the Templo Mayor during four and a half years of work there and to suggest what the Templo Mayor of Tenochtitlan symbolizes: a place of glory for the Mexicas and of misfortune for those who were in their power.



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